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A REVOLT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES
BEING THE PLAIN TALE OF A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN THE
TEACHING OF ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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One evening, late in November, I sat at my desk, filling my red-ink fountain pen—sadly, not knowing it was for the last time. This done, scarcely conscious of the process, I found myself neatly decorating the top sheet of a pile of papers with an average number of P.'s, Sp.'s, Gr.'s, St.'s, carets, irregular circles, horizontal lines, and the like, until, having in due season reached the bottom of the page, I ran a practiced eye in rapid calculation over the paper, once black and white but now, like Macbeth's sea, "one red." There I paused. I did not, as usual, mechanically lay it aside with my left hand, simultaneously grasping the next with my right. I said to my soul, with the color-tone of mild determination—mild, because, though I had wanted to say it many times, even now I scarcely dared voice the awful words—"I will do it no more!" Just what I should do, I did not know. I pushed away the compositions staring me in the face uncorrected—surprise written in every line—and set to work to solve the problem. The result I submit to you, as fellow-English teachers, not because the underlying ideas are essentially new, for we have all put into use the several devices involved in the scheme, but because there may be some far-off touch of newness to commend it to your notice in the proportions and relations of its component parts.

Its purpose is to create in the pupil a vital sense of responsibility in the application of principles once made clear to him, and thoroughly fixed in his mind by appropriately timed reviews. Before outlining the plan, let me urge you not to be startled at the apparent amount of labor it involves. I freely confess to just as great a dislike for the drudgery attendant upon composition teaching as other normal human beings. Therefore I promise you a cheerful ending to my tale. So bear with me to the close.

It was not long before I had mapped out enough of the scheme to give it a trial, for the seemingly sudden revolt on that November night had long been smoldering in my heart. The first step was to prepare in the loose-leaf record-book which I have used, though less extravagantly, for three years, an individual sheet for each pupil in my English classes, covering third-, fifth-, and seventh-semester work.

Now fully awake, I renewed my attack upon that same pile of papers on which I had gazed so wearily a few minutes earlier. And this is what I did: On the individual record sheet before me I jotted down, as they came under my eye, a misused word here; misspelled words here, there, and everywhere; appositives not set off by commas; a plural subject with a singular verb; a case of violated sentence-unity or coherence, and so on along the familiar trails of grammar and rhetoric. It took but a moment for a rough classification of errors. This I recorded in black ink (the color is significant) in the shape of footnotes to the composition. The rest of the paper was, as a rule, untouched. The exceptions to the rule, offering fine opportunities for effective teaching, I shall discuss later. Here is a sample of the record on the pupil's paper, which I might say at this point, with the greater facility gained by practice, I am making more systematic day by day:

NOTE: Two mistakes in spelling. A misused capital. Violations of rules 221 (b), 224, etc. (references to Woolley's *Handbook of Composition*). Two mistakes in grammar. A violation of sentence-unity. Two incoherent sentences, etc.

Then I rated the paper as usual in form and content.

This first set of papers represented a third-semester group. After I had worked out the plan, the day on which the papers were returned to the class I outlined it to them. I told them in brief the reason for the change: that I found that I was doing more than my share of the work; that they were repeating, with smiling serenity, the mistakes of yesterday, of last week, of last semester, of last year, yes, even of the eighth grade and perhaps farther back than that, passively accepting the corrections which their teachers had all these years been laboriously making on their papers; but that now I was going to hold them responsible for the principles

they had been faithfully taught year after year. They did not seem cast down by the thought of having this responsibility shifted to their shoulders, but looked interested. I tried to picture to them Elysian fields of composition in which we should have time to wander, if we could only get rid of the burden of bad spelling, faulty grammar, careless punctuation, and kindred ills that should have gone the way of whooping cough, measles, and other childhood diseases. This occupied but a few minutes of the period. "Now," I said, "we will take stock, as the merchants do on the first of January. Thinking back over your eighth grade, your first year in the high school, and the first six weeks of the third semester, what principles of composition do you recall that have been carefully taught and emphasized by reviews many times?" Their response was eager and intelligent. We covered the ground definitely and in some detail. They agreed that they could advance no sound argument to show the injustice of demanding from them the careful application of such principles, and of marking with severity neglect of them. Then I endeavored to make them see the difference between these elementary but fundamental principles with which they were, or ought to be, thoroughly conversant, and the more recent work—new trails upon which they had just made a fair start, such as sentence and paragraph unity, coherence, and emphasis, requiring greater maturity of judgment in the application of the governing laws than mere questions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. I pointed out to them that, until they had had more practice, the full burden of responsibility would not rest upon their shoulders, but that they should gradually assume more and more. Hence, to bring it home to them, they would be marked less rigidly, just now, for violations of these principles. Thus it is possible to draw the line very distinctly between the careless errors in grammar, spelling, etc., and the newer principles that they are studying at a given time. After this inventory, which filled an interesting period in itself, I returned the papers. One condition made was that they should get no help from anyone but me in finding their mistakes. As this is my home section, I have had every opportunity for close observation, and, as far as I know, they have faithfully kept this condition. The fifth- and seventh-semester classes have, I believe, also been conscientious

in the matter. These third-semester boys and girls entered upon the pursuit of their errors with all the zest of playing a game.

The next step was the conference, the keystone of the plan. They brought me their compositions, with the errors they had found, corrected on the reverse side. At first I gave no definite directions for making these corrections, but since then have devised a scheme for classifying, labeling, and arranging them which teaches the pupil the value of system, and materially lightens the labor of inspecting their corrections.

To resume the story of my first experience: Sometimes it happened that a pupil had discovered only two out of three misspelled words, but the majority found them all, and at least 90 per cent of the other mistakes. Sometimes, I must confess, in running to earth the two words indicated by the footnote, they discovered another, which I had overlooked. If one eluded their search in the first instance, they were usually eager to renew the chase rather than acknowledge defeat by having me point it out to them. Again more than one, in analyzing for grammar or punctuation, would come upon a sentence that they themselves saw might be improved in other ways. Several such sentences were rewritten among the other corrections—a hopeful sign. Out of this class of twenty-nine, I found no one who did not attack his problems with an eager desire to do the thing for himself. My experience with this first paper has been my experience with all, thus far.

With the fifth and seventh semesters I have pursued the same general plan, making them feel, according to the semester, the degree of responsibility resting with them, and I have met the same response. My seventh-semester experience has had its humorous side. There are at least thirteen bright but lazy boys in this section, who have a sufficient sense of humor to realize that they can no longer evade issues—that they cannot assume a knowledge of Woolley which they have not. For they cannot correct their mistakes without the use of this *Handbook of Composition*, when confronted by a footnote which reads somewhat after this fashion: “Find in your paper an example of the error cited by Woolley, page 92, paragraph 224,” a device which has proved an effective antidote for bluffing in the case of these boys, who have taken it with an appreciative smile, and who find themselves—

some of them at least—for the first time in their high-school careers renewing their acquaintance with a composition after its homecoming from a sojourn in the teacher's hands. When one of these boys, only the other day, in talking over with me his errors in punctuation, revealed the fact that he had always punctuated by what he called "feeling," he thus pointedly summed up the situation, at the close of the conference: "I see it is up to me to learn these rules."

In addition to this individual work, I am having an occasional class report-day, on which as many pupils as possible confess to the class their individual mistakes; and the distinction between the individual and class needs is made by calling attention to the proportionate number of pupils and errors. In one such fifth-semester recitation recently, general carelessness in punctuation, for example, was sifted down to a violation of two or three rules for the comma, making a very definite basis for solving their problem. This exercise need not, under this plan, be very frequent in the upper classes. Stock-taking, however, as it may occupy only a few minutes of a period, may recur at shorter intervals.

Note, then, the three steps involved in this method of composition teaching:

1. The record on the individual sheet, corresponding with the footnotes on the pupil's paper, but more detailed. (Catchwords, lists of misspelled words, occasional sentences, quickly jotted down as they appear, have saved time in comparing my record with the pupil's corrections.)
2. Pupil correction of all errors discovered, before coming for conference.
3. The conference.

I called your attention incidentally to the fact that except for the footnotes, which demand an active, not a passive, attitude on the part of pupils, the paper stands, generally speaking, untouched. But the separation of mistakes in these elementary, or, in the upper classes, well-established advanced principles of composition, by means of footnotes, enables me by the use of marginal notes to impress upon the pupil the newer principles which he is just learning; to suggest an improvement in construction in this place, or a better word in that; but above all, to comment upon an apt expression, or an original idea—some real achievement in the art of composition—helpful and encouraging hints often lost in the

overwhelming number of marks on the face of the composition under the old method, which indicated a miscellaneous assortment of errors. But I believe that these marginal notes should be made striking by their rarity and should be largely confined to favorable comment.

It is too early to give any definite statistics as to results, but there are many hopeful signs, to some of which I have already alluded. The pupils seem to take pride in discovering their mistakes; show a desire to work at their papers themselves rather than have me point out their errors to them; and realize their individual faults more keenly. On my side there is also a gain. The individual record sheet enables me to follow up habitual mistakes, and to apply a remedy that will fit the individual. It is a most effective weapon, offensive and defensive, in handling a familiar type of boy or girl who, realizing the number of pupils under a teacher's care, trusts to his forgetting certain weaknesses, and tries to reason him into believing that he has been unjust. It is a sovereign remedy for bluffing. And I have already had one case in which it proved an invaluable asset in my efforts to convince a doting mother that her gifted son is not infallible. This sheet, coupled with the conference, has been the means of unearthing weak spots in former semesters caused by the loss or neglect of a block of work—a means far more effectual than the school record with its barren list of P's and D's, F's and E's.

Two questions may be raised at this point: the first, because my experience, as here given, has covered only second-, third- and fourth-year work, namely, "Will the plan succeed with the first and second semesters?" I answer, I believe that the farther down the line it begins, the better. But surely the pupils of the seventh and eighth grades ought to begin the stock-taking, in one form or another, separating the old from the new, and consciously assuming the responsibility for the old at the earliest possible moment.

The second question, which you have scarcely been able to refrain from shouting aloud since I fully revealed the plan to you, if, indeed, my experience has held your attention at all, is: "Where do you get the time for the enormously greater amount of labor involved in correcting papers under this scheme, to say nothing of

the conferences?" My answer to this question is the happy ending to my tale promised at the beginning. I have fewer papers. A glance into my record-book would at once reveal the difference. I had, for example, four sets of papers, one from each section, handed in between January 12 and January 15. On January 22 I had finished the corrections, and, by returning individual papers, as soon as completed, had held within that same period many conferences. The rest were provided for between the 22d and 26th. Hence, with four sections, numbering 107 pupils, one paper in two weeks would be about the average. But in the meantime the pupils are working. Do not lose sight of that big fact. They are really working. I know by results.

Moreover, I have taken the first step toward correlating the oral paragraph work with this part of the plan, so that practically all questions of paragraph structure can be treated in this way. Nor does our composition teaching need to be restricted to these two forms. There is always the uncorrected work, giving opportunity for pupil practice, and furnishing material for class discussion upon definite points with no aftermath of labor on the teacher's part. Even those who have been skeptical about the wisdom of uncorrected compositions will, I think, see their possibilities when combined with the oral paragraph and the plan I have outlined for overcoming a large percentage of careless errors. Should the fortnightly schedule prove too great a burden, might we not, under this partnership of methods, reduce the number still further? Who knows?

And now, if I have taxed your patience too severely, the reason is that I have become somewhat enthusiastic over this experiment; and enthusiasts, alas, are all too often bores. But it has been many years since I have corrected compositions as cheerfully and hopefully as I have been doing since the memorable November night when I laid down, in revolt, my red-ink fountain pen, for I feel that my pupils are at last beginning to assume an attitude of armed hostility against an array of traditional errors; whereas hitherto they have been, with rare exceptions, non-combatants in a conflict in which I have all too long kept up an ineffectual single-handed combat.